

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 590

SO 021 167

AUTHOR Roberts, Brian A.
TITLE Sociological Reflections on Methods in School Music.
INSTITUTION Canadian Music Educators Association, Toronto (Ontario).
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Sociology; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Learning Theories; *Music Education; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Sociology of Knowledge

ABSTRACT

Written from a sociology of education perspective, this article seeks to answer four questions about teaching methods in music education: (1) to what extent music teachers view the formulation of their method of teaching as a type of content, rather than simply a strategy for the delivery of knowledge; (2) whether the content selected for schools is appropriate for today's students; (3) What is the nature of conscious or unconscious decisionmaking? and (4) How is music education "socially-distributed"? and What importance does this play in the selection of musical knowledge? An 18-item list of references is included. (DB)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED341590

Canadian Music Educators Association

Sociological Reflections on Methods in School Music

by

Dr. Brian A. Roberts

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

DR. B. A.
ROBERTS

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

So 021 167

Canadian Music Educators Association

Sociological Reflections on Methods in School Music

by

Dr. Brian A. Roberts

In the early 1970's, sociologists in the field of education began to shift their concentration toward a much more critical examination of the content of education. Their earlier efforts had been directed toward schools as social structures in which the curriculum was taken-for-granted. There was an obvious and almost total neglect of how knowledge was selected for curricular inclusion. Education is, to quote M.F.D. Young (1971:24/27), "a selection and organization from the available knowledge at a particular time which involves conscious or unconscious choices" and "school curriculum becomes just one of the mechanisms through which knowledge is *socially distributed*".

From this brief introduction, four questions emerge. The first and most obvious question to ask is, "To what extent do music teachers view the construct of *method* as content rather than delivery strategies?" This leads logically to examine how this content is selected. The second question to consider is the "particular time" issue. Here we must ask ourselves if the content selected for schools is appropriate for today's students. The third concerns the nature of conscious or unconscious decision-making. And the last question is centred around how music education is "socially distributed" and what importance this plays in the selection of musical knowledge.

METHOD: CONTENT AND DELIVERY STRATEGIES

There is little space in a brief essay such as this to enter into a long discussion concerning the relationship of content and delivery strategies in music education methods. However, it must be fairly obvious to any informed reader that the teaching or delivery strategies must, by necessity, follow the decision made as to what will be taught. There are, of course, places in the literature (Bowman, 1983) where certain types of teachers are accused of employing teaching strategies without much consideration for what is to be taught, but that appears to me to be more a question of good teaching versus bad teaching and not of particular importance to a discussion of the construct of "method". To place this metaphor in a medical context, one would argue that a particular surgical procedure is effective irrespective of the skill of

the surgeon. This leads to the often quoted black humour that "the operation was a success but the patient died". While many "methods" in music are replete with strategies, these would undoubtedly not have appeared without some consideration as to the substantive issues concerning what ought to be taught. Further, if these strategies are to be seen as legitimate, they must operationalize experiences which lead students to engagement with the selected aspects of music to be taught. In short, if we are to discuss the "method" rather than its relative delivery success, which seems to depend rather more on the skill of the teacher, then what is at issue is *content* rather than presentation.

THE SELECTION AND ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

The interest in curricular content by sociologists led them logically to examine such specific questions as "what counts as school music" (Vulliamy, 1976; Kingsbury, 1984; Small, 1987; Roberts, 1989; Elliott, 1989a). Young (1971) asserts that "knowledge-in-use" is socially constructed since the curriculum is always a selection from all available knowledge. In fact, this accounts for much of the question of high status subjects and low status subjects, a point to which this essay must unfortunately omit detailed consideration. "What counts" can be taken simply to mean what qualifies for inclusion after this selection process has taken place. It is worth mentioning that the curricular content, once selected, is typically presented as a neutral artefact. By that, I mean that the presentation of the selected knowledge is offered as if it were the *only* knowledge in a particular discipline. Further discussion on that point is best left to a longer paper but it is precisely this point that leads to a curriculum that establishes a fixed view of what music counts, simply because it is pre-selected, a sort of curricular tautology.

It might come as little surprise to the reader to learn that what counts as music altogether, whether for the school setting or in society in general, is not at all without controversy. But without pursuing this topic too far in this limited essay, it might be safe to presume that most teachers of music would agree that there is more to teach under the general umbrella of what we individually consider music to be than we have time to do in the

classroom or after school with the students in our charge. This seems to be the only point of agreement among music teachers. In fact, once having said this, each can usually build a point of view as to just what ought to be dealt with musically in the classroom.

Once this "choice" has been made, the teacher has the fundamental property of a "*METHOD*" established. This is what is most frequently mis-named the "philosophy". While it may be some sort of personal quest, belief or even zealot's goal, it is more correctly a selection of musical knowledge which an individual holds to be most appropriate for the students in their charge at a given time. This is a daily decision. By way of example one might ask for each and every class whether the class is expected to be "musicking" (Small, 1987) or learning "about music". Or are students asked to be creative or re-creative (Roberts, 1986)? Or are students asked to be engaged with music alone or in a wider arts context (Rebbeck, 1985)? One could, but probably would not argue for example, that the insistence on using the child's voice as a teaching medium during the early grades in preference to an instrumental medium is totally unjustified because we are told that the child's voice is capable of producing only a limited range of about a fifth or sixth. That sounds like learning to play basketball with a ball only half inflated. At least with an instrumental beginning, one might have a workable instrument at one's disposal. The point is, that what is selected as music becomes what counts as music in your classroom. Not just the literature, but everything concerning the entire social construction of music.

There are, of course, certain individuals who have made their selection of school knowledge in music more public than others. Often these become central figures around which other teachers gather. I refer here naturally to what have become widely known and practised as the, for example, "Kodaly" or "Orff" methods. We read, however, that these faithful are not "Kodaly" teachers nor "Orff" teachers but *music* teachers (Choksy et al., 1986:336).

While it may appear on the surface to be true, it is not in fact at all obvious that these selections of school music knowledge are remotely compatible. Choksy et al. (1986:336) claim that each of the methods detailed in their book has a common goal over which there is "no conflict whatsoever". But a closer look will show even the most cursory reader that this goal is so obscure and so basically non-specific that almost any activity at all, even accidental exposure to elevator music could be seen to fulfil their so-called "common goal". In fact, the first part of their goal for music education is simply the "enhancement of life". This could surely be achieved without any contact with music in any form whatsoever.

My object here is not to focus negative comment on Choksy and her colleagues for having tried to pull together an impossible chapter on eclecticism, but merely to point out that the possibilities for such divergent opinions on what counts as school knowledge in music can lead to totally disparate formulations of curriculum with almost no overlapping at all with the possible exception of some basic common elements of a narrowly defined music tradition within the northern European tradition, largely of the last century.

I will refer the reader back to Choksy et al. (1986:337-342) for an extended position on the various incompatible elements of several of our regnant "methods". But to call the "Kodaly" method the singing & literacy method and "Orff" the instrumental & experiential method would give enough information alone to see that significantly different mediums and paths to musical knowledge have been selected. And to hold that the result of these selections leads to a musical education assumes that a person holds these outcomes as fundamentally "musical".

It is little wonder then, that scholars such as Countryman, Steinecker, Rebbeck, Roberts, Walker, Elliott and others have filled the Canadian Music Educator with challenges for changes in what many have come to see as an inappropriate *status quo*. It may also be said that these many authors do not agree either as to what might count as school music. With inadequate time in the classroom, teachers are forced to make selections as to what they are able to offer their students. For example in one of my earlier pieces (Roberts, 1986:16) I write that "the average music teacher is not involved actively in the nurturing of the creative process at all". Before a teacher were to alter the curriculum to take account of my charge, then that teacher ought to challenge to what extent the "creative" process in music is considered valid, or at the very least, more valid than what the teacher currently holds as valid. If a teacher or other person who builds curriculum guides considers the study of old world masterpieces as the critical knowledge to engage students in, then a student's own compositions could easily be viewed as an unnecessary diversion at the least, or a total waste of time at the extreme.

It is at this point that the sociologist renews his or her interest because many of the questions asked by such nominative "methods" in their attempt to validate their selection of knowledge by researching such questions as "how do students learn music" more often than not presuppose answers to a prior question seldom posed as to "what is the basis of the *set of meanings* that come to be typified under the term music" (Young, 1971:27). It is of the utmost importance that we understand what

"counts" as music before any meaningful selection may be made it. If one were to consider the ways of learning jazz in comparison to the way one might learn a *Lied* by Schubert, it seems obvious that to investigate "how students learn" in the absence of stating precisely "what" is patently absurd. Yet much is suggested to us as "fact" on the basis of research with these basic underlying deficiencies. Thus Walker (1984:38) is perfectly correct when he challenges the "so-mi" roots of the "Kodaly" method. He would not be correct to assert that this same "so-mi" would be equally inappropriate when applied to the music that this method has selected.

Thus we return to Choksy et al. (1986:342) who write, "If the authors of this book could erase one word from the English language as it is used in music education, it would be eclecticism". While it is true that there are teachers who seem not to have any particular frame (Bernstein, 1971) for their school knowledge, most thinking and articulate teachers do, even if unconsciously. If the selection of school knowledge made by the teacher is not precisely aligned with the pre-selected models in the "Orff" or "Kodaly" methods, for example, then the teacher has little option other than to stray from these pre-selected notions of what counts as school music. A teacher who believes, for instance, that "only the best is good enough" for the selection of musical material for the classroom would appear to follow exactly what the "Kodaly" method espouses until one examines more closely what actually counts as music for that teacher. It is all very well and good enough to select only the best, but one must also define the greater pool of music from which the selection is made. Thus in our more multi-cultural environment in Canada, the very best music in our test case teacher's class may include not a single piece of music in common with an outstanding programme following the "Kodaly" model. What counts as music may be so fundamentally different from the northern European tradition of the 19th Century, that there is simply no common thread (Elliott 1984; Walker, 1986). In fact, one need not travel so far afield to see that what is held important could easily be devised from quite opposite corners of what some "believers" consider their turf.

In fact, the only real difference between Orff, Kodaly and a reasonably cogent teacher of music who has made an intelligent decision concerning the selection of school knowledge is that our teacher is simply less famous. In the absence of a flock, one is not a shepherd but simply a thinker on the crest of a field. When like-minded others gather around, the hope must be to present the rationale for making the decisions that one has made and presenting the specific musical goals that the selection of knowledge is seen to produce. The Kodaly method, for example, is a good and reasonable method only, and exclusively, if one concurs with the musical outcomes that

derive from the decisions concerning the knowledge of music. If one has other legitimate or challenging goals for musical experiences for the children in the classroom, then the strategies which produce an involvement with music in a manner concurrent with "Kodaly" thinking are patently inappropriate.

THE QUESTION OF TIME

Ball (1986:69) writes that "what counts as school Mathematics or school English may actually change over time as new definitions are asserted by powerful advocates". In music, the situation is no less stable. Most musicians are familiar enough with historical shifts in what has been considered "good" music. A quick look back through Slonimsky's (1965:225) Lexicon of Musical Invective and we read of Wagner's masterpiece *Lohengrin*, "It is poison - rank poison. All we can make out is an incoherent mass of rubbish, with no more real pretension to be called music than the jangling and clashing of gongs..." (*Musical World*, London: June 30, 1855). Now here surely is the stuff for our curriculum! Thus when teachers claim that they are using only the "best" music, it is indeed a powerful question to ask on what basis the decision has been made. Thus we return to Walker's (1984) challenge of a method based on elements such as "so-mi". Time does play a role in our taking positive account of things around us. Who would have thought twenty years ago that a child would grow up with what we now consider a powerful computer in his home.

What counts as music has changed! We are beginning to see that the value of music rests in the people that are "musicking", that is to say that "music is, in essence, something that *people make or do*, a people's music is something that they *are*" (Elliott, 1989b:12). What has become important is the degree of social ownership of music. Value in music can be established as much by the depth of belonging to a people as by any other criteria. What would have been appropriate music under an "aesthetic education" model has been shown to be limited and inappropriate in today's world (Roberts, 1989). A curriculum that is built on a selection of knowledge based even partly on a single cultural location and period cannot reflect today's standards for what counts as music.

CONSCIOUS OR UNCONSCIOUS SELECTION

Much of what counts as music for teachers is directly tied to their own idea of what a musician is and how one gets to be one. It may not come as much surprise to learn that "musicians" tend to define "musician" largely in terms of that which they themselves can do musically. This means typically that those musicians who can

extemporize well usually consider this to be an important criteria in determining whether one is or is not a musician. Similarly, those whose main strength is note reading place this musical skill high on the list for determining whether one qualifies as a musician. Tied specifically to this is the apparent necessity for societal labelling as a musician and one's typically overt social acts to confirm both to oneself and others that this musician status has been attained (Roberts, 1991). This contributes significantly to unconscious decisions made concerning which aspects of musicianship are, in socially constructed fact, important or even necessary to build into a method.

SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Because "music" is so universal in society, what counts as music is legitimately decided as much outside the classroom as in it. Methods which ignore this reality do so at their own peril. This public definition of curricular knowledge is not the case in many subjects. But because there is a social ownership of music as a social construction, curriculum is clearly only *one* of the ways musical knowledge is distributed as is suggested by Young (1971). Music teachers acknowledge the community's role in selecting musical knowledge for the classroom every time they present a public concert. This social sharing is an important part of what music is usually considered to be. Again, this is substantially different than what counts as mathematics where we seldom see students on stage reciting math tables before an audience.

All music methods are flawed today to the extent that these current methods do not take into account the changing definition of world musics as well as accept our own Western cultural cornucopia of musical styles. The selection of school knowledge in music will continue to challenge those engaged, because music is as alive as those who "music".

REFERENCES

Ball, Stephen (1986) Sociology in Focus: Education, Longman.

Bernstein, B. (1971) "On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge" in Young, M.F.D. (ed.) (1971) Knowledge and Control. Collier-Macmillan.

Bowman, Wayne (1983) "Reflections on the Methodology Controversy", Canadian Music Educator, 25/1.

Choksy, Lois; Abramson, R.; Gillespie, A.; and Woods D. (1986) Teaching Music in the Twentieth Century. Prentice-Hall.

Elliott, David (1984) "The Role of Music and Musical Experience", Canadian Music Educator, 26/2.

Elliott, David (1989a) "What Music Is?" Unpublished Keynote address to the NTA Music Council Conference, St. John's, Nfld.

Elliott, David (1989b) "Key concepts in multicultural Music Education", International Journal of Music Education, No.13.

Kingsbury, Henry (1984) "Music as a Cultural System: Structure and Process in an American Conservatory", PhD dissertation, Indiana University.

Rebbeck, L. (1985) "Arts: Unity through Diversity", Canadian Music Educator, 26/3.

Roberts, Brian A. (1991) "Musician" - A Question of Labelling: A Monograph in the Sociological Foundations of Music Education. St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Roberts, Brian A. (1986) "Heresy - or- Do we really need another rendering of a Sousa march?", Canadian Music Educator, 27/3.

Roberts, Brian A. (1989) "Zweifel an der ästhetische Erziehung als ausreichende Begründung der Schulmusik" Referat anl. des 8. Symposium der Internationale Gesellschaft für Polyästhetische Erziehung, Salzburg, Austria.

Slonimsky, N. (1965) Lexicon of Musical Invective, Coleman-Ross.

Small, Christopher (1987) Music of the Common Tongue, Calder.

Vulliamy, Graham (1976) "What counts as school music" in Whitty, G. (1976) Explorations in the Politics of School Knowledge, Nafferton.

Walker, Robert (1984) Music Education: Tradition and Innovation. Charles C. Thomas Publisher.

Walker, Robert (1986) "Musical Concepts and Precepts", Canadian Music Educator, 27/4.

Young, M.F.D. (ed.) (1971) Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education. Collier-Macmillan.